

A Close Encounter With Vandalism

Superintendent recalls distressing night

BY RON FURLONG

On a cool summer's night in northern Washington not long ago, I was dreaming happily about such topics as great horned owls, my compost pile, fairway discoloration, the inability to double verticut 29 greens in one day, gasoline prices and why the Minnesota Timberwolves can't get past the first round. Just as Kevin Garnett was dunking over Tim Duncan's outstretched hands, the phone rang. It was 3:15 a.m.

Now, it's never good to get a phone call at 3:15 a.m. If you won the lottery, they aren't going to call you to tell you at 3:15 a.m. If you got a raise, your boss is not going to call at 3:15 a.m. If you're cholesterol level finally dropped into the normal range, your

doctor is not going to call you at 3:15 a.m.

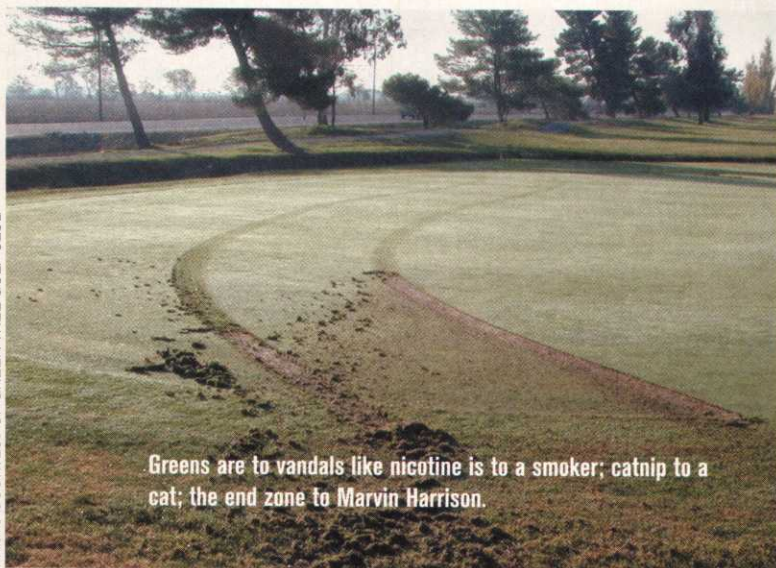
As I raced for the phone in an attempt to prevent the waking of my wife and daughter, the terrible thoughts one gets at 3:15 in the morning when the phone rings were racing through my head. You start actually hoping for the lesser of evils. You know it's going to be something bad, but maybe it's only something just a little bad and not really bad. I kicked over a Bob the Builder toy as I went for the phone. "Can we fix it?" Bob asked me in his tiny toy voice from the floor. "I hope so," I whispered to Bob as I reached for the phone.

I didn't get to the phone in time. It stopped ringing. I waited a few moments and then checked the message. The voice on the other end of the phone was cold and direct, something quite out of the ordinary for this particular voice. "Ron, we've got vandals at the course. You better get in here."

It was the golf pro at my course. I had never heard him so implacable. I got ready for work in a sort of trance, my mind racing at the possibilities of what the phone call could mean; none of the possibilities were pleasant. I put deodorant under only my left arm and shaved only my right cheek. My socks didn't match and I dressed for January instead of June, inexplicably putting layers of sweaters and coats on like I was going for a hike in the Yukon.

As I began my normally 22-minute drive to work, I began to disrobe, throwing off coats and sweaters in earnest as I drove haphazardly down the winding road near my house. I

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PHOTO COURTESY OF GREEN TREE GOLF CLUB

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almost turned north instead of south, catching myself at the last moment. The words of the golf pro kept echoing in my head: "We've got vandals at the course. You better get in here."

I've heard the horror stories, as we all have. Roundup on the greens. Maintenance building torched. What could they be doing, I wondered? "We've got vandals on the course." My God, were they still there? Was I going to be involved in a hunt through the trees and bushes for the culprits? Did we have them cornered, and I was being called in as a backup?

The first leg of my drive to work I normally do in eight to 10 minutes. This time I did it in six. As I drove my thoughts kept going back to one thing: the greens. Nothing else, I suddenly realized as I drove, mattered nearly as much. Donuts in the fairways I could deal with. A little bunker edge repair we could handle. A few golf cars in ponds we could pull out. But the greens. ... Oh, I hoped they stayed off the precious "pads."

They didn't of course. How could they? Greens are to vandals like nicotine is to a smoker; catnip to a cat; the end zone to Marvin Harrison. They are too appealing. Too tempting. Too wonderful to pass up.

The first thing I heard as I pulled into the course (a record drive time of 17 minutes) was that the vandals had stolen golf cars and driven all over the course, including on all of the greens. We have 27 holes and two putting greens. I was also informed they had been caught. There were seven teenagers. Two of them were so drunk they were found passed out on the course. Although the course is secluded with no homes around it, a neighbor at a nearby farm had heard them and called the police. Encountering our locked gate, an officer had hiked up the long entrance road and surprised them, nabbing all seven.

Inspection of the course found about 15 stolen golf cars, which they used for joy riding. Several of the cars were in ditches or ponds. The damage to the course was limited to the greens and a couple of bunkers. The greens damage was superficial. They had done the classic "donuts" on every green, some worse than others. However, the firmness of the greens saved us. Had this been during the rains of winter, the damage would have been severe.

After a soluble fertilizer application, we were

grown out of any visible damage in two days. The bunker repair took about four hours. Nothing major. We were lucky.

My brush with vandalism left me wondering what some other superintendents have had to deal with in this area. As I made a few inquiries, I heard tales ranging from a fired employee trying to set a diesel tank on fire (how you can try to set a gas tank on fire and not succeed is beyond me) to another fired employee poisoning a pond and killing some geese and fish.

Thomas J. Fiegel, superintendent at Niagara Frontier Country Club in Youngstown, N.Y., deals with vandalism on an almost regular basis. "My employees don't even like to tell me anymore, I get so upset," he says. "When I see damage, I need to get away and be myself for awhile."

Part of dealing with vandalism is dealing with the question of who would do such a thing and why. Perhaps one can almost understand a vengeful past employee or simply someone that has a personal grudge against you. But understanding the mindset of an individual or group that deliberately sets out to destroy property simply because it is there is difficult at best.

Dan Evers, superintendent at Compass Pointe Golf Course in Pasadena, Md., sent me some frightening pictures from an incident that occurred last August. A kid in a jeep tore up three holes and completely destroyed one green. Evers said they caught him, and a court date was scheduled. The picture he sent of what used to be a green was enough to scare the living daylights out of any superintendent.

So, you may ask, did I learn any valuable lessons from my experience or from the stories of others? Not really. But I do know that vandalism is going to occur at some level to almost every single one of us at one time or another. You can do your best to protect your course (fences, gates, hourly police patrols, motion lights, neighborhood watch,) but you're still going to get bitten at some point.

The only advice I can offer is don't answer the phone at 3:15 in the morning. Let it ring, go back to sleep and keep dreaming of those great horned owls. ■

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